CHAPTER 4

"The Genuine Family of My Extraordinary Youth": Male Bonding in the Italian Literature of the First World War

Marco Mondini

4.1 Introduction

In his book about the "emotional survival" of British soldiers in the First World War, Michael Roper devotes a few pages to the perception of the army as a "domestic institution," or simply as "a new family." In war memoirs, especially the junior officers' work was often described as "housewifery" or "mothering": "the habit of describing the subaltern's work as 'housewifery' or 'mothering' was more than a linguistic quirk, for there were structural similarities between these roles" (Roper 2009, p. 165). Roper's analysis is an effective introduction to one of the most common themes in the ego-documents of the First World War,[1] that is, the creation of a close emotional bond among combatants: a real transnational pattern of war experience, evident above all in the narrative

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structure of WWI memoirs (Winter 2006, Das 2006; Meyer 2009; Crouthamel 2014). In this chapter, I will analyse the features of male bonding as depicted in the Italian literature of the First World War. After introducing the notion of the Italian literary field of the First World War, I will tackle two issues: the widespread theme of war experience as a *liminal moment*, and military life as a *discovery*. First, I will discuss to what extent the war experience was considered as a transition to a *true* male identity; I will then concentrate on trench life as a moment of discovery of a new, genuine family, that is, the community of brothers in arms.

4.2 Similarities and Uniqueness: Italian War Writers and the First World War

The Italian authors of the First World War show clear similarities with soldiers-writers and poets from other armies, while also presenting some unique features. The most evident trait common to all European war literature—which makes it possible to talk about the conflict as a transnational cultural experience—is the centrality of a small group of fellows to the descriptions of life and death in the trenches (Smith 2000, Beaupré 2014; Lafon 2014). In Italy too, as on the other fronts, a soldier's trenchmates (or the team, the platoon) became quickly an emotional microcosm: the relationships with the other men (the "brothers in arms") were the core of the sentimental world of the combatants and, above all, their main psychological support (Mondini 2014a). Another common trait is that even in the literary field of the Italian war, written testimonies from 1914 to 1918 show no fractures in the "myth of experiencing war," as defined by George Mosse. Most of the WWI authors—whose writings convey to us the meaning of the war—believed that for all its bloody horror, war still had a holy, sacred aura (Mosse 1990). In most cases, they did not represent themselves or their comrades as victims, but claimed their roles as active heroes within the great tragedy of the conflict. Even in the British literature, the most critical of the traditional models of honour and glory, the experience of comradeship in the trenches redeemed "the sordidness and stupidity" of war (as Basil Liddell Hart declared in 1933), transforming the cost to human life into a spiritual rebirth (Cole 2003, pp. 140–41). Moreover, the European literature of the time in general did not echo the bitter British tone. In the French and German war literatures, widespread disillusion with traditional, institutional rhetorical assumptions about the

beauty of sacrifice in battle did not repress a desire to paint life in the trenches in colours that were not relentlessly dark, even among the most realistic and bitter writings about the Western Front (Winter 2013). Blaise Cendrars, Roland Dorgelès (*Les Croix de Bois*, 1919) and Henri Barbusse (*Le feu*, 1916) did not reveal merely the combatants' hard living conditions, their leaders' inability and the grotesque feeling of uselessness shared by most soldiers: their writings also provide touching images of the soldiers' own virtues, as they faced the relentless, omnipresent shadow of death. Their commitment and the need to make personal sacrifices for their community (often identified with a small group of brothers in arms rather than a national homeland) are also often clearly evident (Trevisan 2001; Beaupré 2006; Smith 2008). As Leonard Smith (2016) has noted, many of the texts generally regarded as pacifist should probably be reread as, instead, the accounts of sophisticated writers describing the war as an apocalypse overwhelming their lives, a liminal experience which took them into a different world (or, sometimes, into a different season of their lives) and which many wanted to describe without hypocrisy or embellishment, but also without denying their own choice to fight.

As a matter of fact, this persistence of a heroic (or patriotic) gaze was also due to external factors, not linked to individual experience of the trenches, battle and death. The significant role played by the coercive power of tradition was one of them. The survival of traditional war iconography and the fascination aroused by texts read at school (which shaped the cultural horizons of young combatants, and hence their images and narratives of the war) were still dominant and were to remain so until the rupture caused by the Second World War (and sometimes until the Vietnam War) (Hynes 1997; Giesen 2004; Favret 2010; Mondini 2013). Another factor to be considered concerns the different rules of the national cultural market during, but above all, after 1914–1918. Particularly in the Italian case, the publishing market between the wars was far from free. When fascism seized power, in 1922, the government extended, perfected and centralized a system of preventive censorship (Bonsaver 2007). Under that discipline, there would be many cases of self-censorship in the culture market, involving writers, playwrights and directors. Generally speaking, the result was an ideological ostracism that drastically limited what could be said or published. Foreign works suspected of being offensive to the image of the army or harmful to the militant upbringing of youth were banned, which meant that literature tended to become impermeable to international input. But even authors whose story clashed with the

glorious martial value of Vittorio Veneto would be blocked or removed from circulation: over the years the censor's axe would fall on writers guilty merely of undue realism about the conduct of the war or irreverence towards the military caste, like the later renowned memoir *Trincee* by Carlo Salsa (1924) (Mondini 2014a, pp. 168–80). In such a climate, it is no wonder that relatively few war novels, memoirs and diaries were published and sold in Italy (and nearly all by Italian authors). One marvels, indeed, at how those few managed to slip through the net of the regime censorship. Yet, the first (and most important) peculiarity of the Italian field of war memoirs is undoubtedly its generational and cultural homogeneity.

In fact, the eligible candidates for a canon of Italian war literature are few and far between: even by extending one's survey to the late 1960s and taking into account the intrinsic ambiguity of such classifications, the total comes to about 250 titles in all (this at least according to the indexes of the Bibliografia Nazionale Italiana). Moreover, the range of authorial profiles is restricted. Professional soldiers, such as career officers and generals, are responsible for a comparatively small number of memoirs and diaries (whose circulation was small anyway). Common troopers and sergeants are rare. The overwhelming majority of the texts that make up the literary field of war in Italy until the late 1960s (nearly four titles out of five) are the work of junior officers of the reserve (Mondini 2014b). The undisputed predominance of reserve officers in the literary canon of the Great War was an Italian peculiarity, whose main causes, independent but interrelated, were the virtual non-existence of volunteers and a policy of automatic promotion to junior ranks for all reservists who held a high-school diploma or university degree. The Italian military had never warmed to the concept of "volunteering." The status of volunteer was refused even to the young men who had spontaneously requested to join the army ahead of their scheduled mandatory service. Militant interventionists were rejected by the recruiters as politically suspicious elements. "Student battalions," formerly a major instrument of cultural mobilization, were disbanded (Papa 2013). The rigid class structure of the Italian military resulted in the mass promotion of nearly 200,000 among candidates, sublieutenants and lieutenants (Rochat 1989). The sole requirements were social rank and academic background. As a result, few of the best-known Italian soldiers-writers left for the front as common troopers (most of them, in possession of basic academic qualifications, qualified for

admission to the courses for sub-lieutenants and candidates). The rest were promoted during the war.

This hierarchic, generational and cultural homogeneity had important repercussions. As junior officers fighting on the front, Italian war writers developed a highly specific view of the conflict, centred on the experience of the trench community. The moral protagonist of their works and the true custodian of victory was the community of warriors and their commanders, the men whom Carlo Salsa calls "trinceristi" (trench people) and Mario Mariani "plotonisti" (platoon officers): "The plotonista is the man who commands a platoon, or a section in artillery. He's a subaltern, the 'rank-and-file' of officers. He's exceedingly modest, he cares little about career, he is not after decorations, he is always ready to run risks and work hard, he prefers to live among soldiers than hang around with his superiors" (Mariani 1925, pp. 151–60). Moreover, many officers-writers had shared the popular enthusiasm for interventionism. Their social position and ideological background varied, but they were after all an expression of the same demographics. The age group of those "born after 1880," as many young intellectuals and journalists liked to call themselves, was a highly specific segment of the Italian cultural field pre-war. Being born after 1880 meant belonging to the first generation of Italians who had been educated in a public national school system. Their mind-set was decidedly secular and patriotic, modelled after the illustrious examples of the heroes of the independence wars of 1848–1866 (Sabbatucci 1998). They believed that the mission of the fledgling Italian nation was to repeat the outstanding battles of the Risorgimento by conquering the missing provinces of Trento and Trieste, and by turning Italy into a great European power (Janz 2008). Surprisingly, the political significance of the Great War and the reasons behind Italy's intervention are not among the pivotal themes in the memoirs and diaries that make up the Italian literary field of war. The generation of 1915 was first and foremost a generation of sons, overwhelmed by the glorious deeds of their fathers, the founders of the national state (Papadia 2013). The political mediocrity of liberal Italy disgusted the young, and the failure of the Italian colonial wars depressed them: they were impatient to measure up to the obsessively heroic pedagogy that had marked their childhood at school and at home. They were striving to break free from a condition of psychological inferiority and prove the world (and of course their parents) that they, too, were adults and valiant soldiers (Patriarca 2010, pp. 109–36). Twenty-year-old men thus created a shared narrative in which war could only appear as first and

foremost a great opportunity. The real point, after all, was not expanding the frontiers of the *Patria* (homeland): as Francesco Formigari, who pioneered the study of war memoirs as a genre, observed as early as the 1930s, "the longing for Trento and Trieste left little or no trace in post-war literature" (Formigari 1935, p. 25). Even in the letters and diaries of the most vocal nationalists, the experience of the conflict was primarily a moral, not a political, one. This is not to say that the soldiers-writers had forgotten or disavowed the more or less ideal goals of their early interventionism. In occasional works by republican or radical interventionists, for example, the ideological dimension remains strong, and the markedly political goals of the so-called *maggio radioso* ("the glorious May") continued to innervate the reminiscence of the conflict.[2] In Luigi Gasparotto's *Diario di un fante*, for example, the narration of the author's own war experience, all the way from enlistment as a subaltern official to life in the trenches, is inseparable from the persistent and unyielding feeling that the Great War was the final chapter of the Risorgimento, a crusade of liberation from the "Austrian yoke" (Gasparotto 1919).

In most cases, however, Italian war memoirs and diaries attested to the rapid obsolescence of a pre-war political outlook, which was all but replaced by the theme of war as an existential experience. When the authors joined the "nation in arms," they discovered a new dimension of life, a community in which they could grow and regenerate themselves by discovering (or rediscovering) the values of the warrior ethos: courage and strength as an index of one's masculinity, loyalty, comradeship and spirit of sacrifice. In many ways, this is the Italian version of a typical transnational notion of the war culture: conflict as an opportunity for the emergence of a "fire generation" (Cabanes 2007; Erll 2009). In the Italian experience, however, the narration of the Great War takes the more specific form of a collective *Bildungsroman*, a discursive construction in which the account of real events and the description of the actual fighting are comparatively marginal. What really stands out are the memories of a small group of comrades with whom the narrator has shared the dramatic and unique season of war, and to whom he looks back with a mixture of pain and nostalgia. The writers of 1915–1918 tend to stage themselves as survivors, whose responsibility is to describe war exactly as it happened: a crucible of suffering, sacrifice and sorrow, but also a place of bonding, enthusiasm and brotherhood. As elsewhere (for instance, in French literature, analysed by Carine Trevisan), telling the tale is presented as something that the survivors owe to the fallen, whose memory they wish to immortalize, but

also as a vindication of truth in the face of "gratuitous patriotism" and the illegitimate rhetoric of false heroes (Trevisan 2001, pp. 149–72). "People who have not suffered, people who have adored the Motherland from home or from the rear lines, have no right to cast the first stone at my book, nor the last for that matter," shouted Carlo Salsa in one of the most iconic tirades against the cursed race of pompous false witnesses, made up in equal parts of armchair journalists and rear-line officers:

> What else is new! The first to blather were journalists, the megaphones of hearsay, proud sentries armed with binoculars who wrote from a mess-hall in the rear lines; then we have heard countless tales … marred by vanity or curious lapses of memory, tales of fighters relieved after a few gunshots … yarns in which our heroic infantrymen—poor wretches, "heroic" is a figure of speech—were seen gallantly levering their guns from shielded trenches that seemed blessed with all the luxuries of modern comfort, dead enemies strewn all around. (Salsa 1982, p. 15)

Those who wrote testimonials were convinced that people who had never fought could never completely understand the reality of the front line and the ambivalent nature of military life—the death and suffering, the horror and repulsion, but also the bonds of loyalty, dedication, bravery, even joy: "war is not only made of dead … war is like everything else … is horrible but also beautiful" (Bartolini 1934, p. 24). This was the ambiguity, thought to be incomprehensible to most people, which was revealed in *La prova del fuoco* by Carlo Pastorino. The author felt morally obliged to dedicate his memoirs to the brothers in arms with whom he had shared suffering, death and imprisonment, but also an unbreakable fraternal bond, which they still "remember together," even as they "are walking on different paths" in their everyday post-war lives (Pastorino 2010, p. 10).

Mario Mariani dedicated *Sott'la Naja* to his "war comrades" while the war still raged. Had he not done so, the true fighters would have remained unknown, unlike the "false heroes" mannequins celebrated by journalists and in propagandistic products. The author claimed to have written purely out of duty, in order to pay homage to his brothers in arms (Mariani 1925, p. 5). The irreverent, ironic writing of Giuseppe Personeni, a notary who served as an infantry officer and whose war memoirs were popular immediately after the conflict, is also dedicated to "my brothers in arms": "I will be rewarded enough if I will know that in those remembrances they see

the good and bad moments of our Odyssey" (Personeni 1966, p. 9). Moreover, Personeni's belief that his comrades were his real audience (because only they were capable of fully understanding him) was largely shared. This is the case of Michele Campana, another young reserve officer who became then a successful author and a journalist, who writes: "only my brothers in arms can understand and love this book, because they created it with their blood" (Campana 1918, p. 152).

The inability of combatants to truly express their experience of war to "others" (those on the home front, shirkers, pacifists, women) is, in fact, one of the most characteristic themes of twentieth-century war narrative, both in Italy and elsewhere. The veterans' belief that they were incapable of expressing their own life experience (an *aphasia* which traumatically affected their return to civilian life) found a parallel in the copious military rhetoric embraced by Italian newspapers and civilian media during the First World War (Beaupré 2014). As Paolo Monelli wrote in his introduction to *Le scarpe al sole*:

> Either lost in the dreary routine of bourgeois life or living as hermits in a secluded mountain pass in the Alps, they must be still living somewhere, my old comrades at arms, who went through those humbling years of war without pomp and glory, and whose hearts are heavy with nostalgia. To them I offer this book, unceremoniously, as people once offered a glass of wine and a song for the road to the passer-by whom they beckoned to their hospitable table. (Monelli 1971, pp. 5–6)

Typically, this official record adapted the reality of war to the taste of a civilian audience. Skirmishes became epoch-making battles, slight advances turned into strategic breakthroughs and bloodbaths into glorious sacrifices; even serious defeats or setbacks were described using reassuring formulas: "tactical withdrawals," "significant losses"—a repertoire which later wars would draw on (Bergamini 2009, pp. 54–70). The acknowledged master of such narrative was Luigi Barzini, probably Italy's most famous war correspondent, whose dispatches from the front were stylistically brilliant and indulgently purple. Fearless soldiers, athletic young officers sportingly leading the attack, the enemy constantly in flight—all were cast against a picturesque landscape which Barzini often made the real protagonist of his reportage: snowy peaks jutting skywards were the ideal setting for what was (aesthetically) the only war worth recounting: that between tiny bands of *Alpini* and *Kaiserjäger* engaged in epic struggles among the glaciers, or fighter pilots, latter-day knights, daring the skies—all of them remote from the ugly slaughter in the mud of the trenches

(Mondini 2014a, pp. 211–25). *Sui monti, nel cielo e nel mare* was, significantly, the title of a popular book in which Barzini gathered his best dazzling despatches; no trace here of the dreary saga of trench warfare, instead we are regaled with "azure skies stretching far away," "craggy peaks merging into the shimmering depths of space" and heroic aviators dying serenely after duels with the enemy—all of which gave the public the illusion of a nice clean war (Barzini 1916, pp. 188, 203, 220). The contrast between such Barzinisms ("barzinate" as all media hype came to be known) and the grinding anonymity of real combat could hardly have been more glaring. The main issue was not the edifying images with which the front line was served up to the general public, but one of, above all, language. The latter reveals a polarizing inequality between those who lived the war, but did not write or speak about it, and those who assumed the right to tell a life experience they had never lived, and, in doing so, aroused the anger of the true witnesses. In Italy, too, the status of eyewitness was the only legitimate standard by which veterans could narrate the conflict (Prochasson 2008, pp. 167–208; De Biasio 2016, pp. 149–65).

4.3 Intimacy and Nostalgia: Male Comradeship

Describing the bond with his trench companions, Gino Cornali, one of the many educated young people enlisted as infantry officers, talked about "brothers … brought together before God" (Cornali 1934, p. 282). The soldiers were all aware of how precarious these bonds were, how likely they were to end in death: such brotherhood was indestructible in life but, as Monelli wrote, composed of "'morituri' per definizione" ("men who are, par excellence, about to die") (Monelli 1971, p. 172). The men who wrote about their experience of war were the members of a "fire generation" who had survived, not because they deserved it, but merely by chance. In return for this luck, it was up to them to reveal the war as it truly had been, a terrible mix of suffering, sacrifice and pain, which nevertheless also contained affection, passion and brotherhood (Cornali 1934, p. 297). Storytelling thus became a duty to their lost brothers: veterans were "the executers of those who died" (Valois 1924, p. 295). Those who wrote claimed that they did so not for themselves, nor to glorify their country, rather as an obligation to their companions. In their writings, the dead would live forever, and the emotions aroused by the brotherhood in arms would survive the years to come so that the reality of the war, and the memory of the people who had fought it, would not be swamped in the

illegitimate patriotism and rhetoric of the false heroes who had hidden in the rear.

Since it was closely connected to the spiritual will of a whole generation, wartime testimony was concerned with conveying a story centred on a heroic collectivity. Unlike the classical prototype of Achilles, the triumphant hero who willingly accepts war and death in order to achieve eternal glory (a key reference in the British war literature of 1914–1918), the modest Italian combatant sacrificed himself only for the love of his small community of brothers in arms. They too, however, were to be remembered as great heroes within the context of this understated epic. Their place in the collective memory would be guaranteed by the survivors who purposefully kept their memories alive, as Connerton (1989) has noted. "When the new generation, the sons of our sons, will learn the names and the dates of the glorious battles, we will be proud to be part of eternal events," claimed Vittorio Amoretti in the preface to the history of the Monte Clapier battalion (Amoretti 2013). The veterans' greatest fear was that the memory of *their own* war would be lost. What the survivors wanted, and most memorialists created, was an epic of the small community at war, a *tale of deeds* which would immortalize their youth (an emotional heritage they would treasure for the rest of their lives) while also keeping alive the memory of "our fallen comrades, the brothers of our truest, happiest season" (Amoretti 2013, p. 19). Vittorio Locchi, the author of what is probably the most popular Italian poem on the Great War, *La sagra di Santa Gorizia*, claimed that its genesis lay in his desire to remember "the brothers of the battlefield/who survived/who passed away" (Locchi 2008, pp. 16–17). Locchi's long work partly owes its popularity to its hyper-realistic description of the infantry's terrible living conditions and almost total absence of any nationalistic or aesthetic emphasis. But primarily its success is due to the heartfelt celebration of the war's main characters, the young "callow, jolly boys," who died in the name of a common sense of duty and of the fraternal love which had bound them together before their deaths (Mondini 2014a, pp. 180–85).

Storytelling was an obligation since the tragic adventure of the war could only be told by those who had undergone it (Winter 2010, Smith 2008). This small band of brothers focuses the writer's attention, even to the point of obsession, and fosters the depiction of edifying portraits of friends, colleagues and lower ranks. Still, the tale of the emotional community of brothers in arms reveals often how the heroic ideal of companionship is, at the same time, widespread and plural (Savettieri 2016).

Pastorino's community of fighting men is a close-knit web of ties of solidarity, acts of generosity, personal acknowledgement between officers and soldiers in which modern discipline and hierarchy count for little (Isnenghi 1989, pp. 236–37). But in Carlo Salsa, too, "the platoon spirit" keeps an ethical view of war alive. For all the blunt condemnation of the tragic living conditions in the trenches where death is always futile and inglorious ("if only we snuffed it for something at least!"), the subaltern knows he can only survive within a community of destinies coinciding with his small unit, an *us* made up of companions in arms. They are "lousy ... good comrades" who welcome their lieutenant when he walks out of the military hospital, and provide a haven after a spell of leave, a source of trauma for any veteran (Salsa 1982, p. 193). In Pastorino, even the condition of POW is presented as a positive opportunity, a test for the "brotherly love" of a selected group of friends, a privileged bond that will endure beyond the prison camp and war itself (Mondini 2014a, pp. 203–10). In Salsa, however, captivity is a long torture without redemption, "an endless seclusion ... that bores a void made of lunacy into our skulls" (Salsa 1982, p. 200). Things are made even worse by the debasing conditions in which he is forced to live, by the humiliation of defeat and by the self-inflicted reproach for cowardice, a condition from which there is no deliverance. Still, Pastorino's edifying tale and Salsa's bitter parable converge in the very structure of the narration, in which war is presented as the gateway into a new life. It is the same with most war writers, not just the Italian ones.

The area behind the lines (the military hospital above all) is the refuge of skivers in uniform, creatures despised as cowards and envied because they live in safety, Pastorino's "clean-shaven young sergeants" who only emerge "like mice from their dens when there's a ceremony to attend" (Pastorino 2010, p. 119). But for ignorance, and insensitivity to the "trench boys," the town is the thing, the true homeland of the incorrigibly different. Towns are populated with one-time warmongers who got themselves recycled behind the lines, warriors out of an operetta and sons of string-pullers in cushy sedentary postings, pub strategists complete with fast floozies, leading a comfortable modern life which goes on unabashed, whatever the squalor of the trenches. Half-men gone to seed (the "fat slob" whom Attilio Frescura meets in Milan, the "pot-bellied" colonel who punishes Salsa before he leaves for the front), these figures of scorn have a cathartic function: they sum up all that the fighting man is not (coward, unmanly, cunning) and cannot do (enjoy life, consort with women); they point to the noble contrast of those sacrificed on the front,

the difference between those for whom the war means fighting and those for whom it is just words or even good for business (Ridel 2007, pp. 48–59). Wounded and convalescent, Luigi Tonelli winds up at a New Year's Eve party and is overwhelmed by the impact of that endless world of merry, colourful (civilian) life pressing on regardless of suffering and death. Hypocritically, for form's sake, the fallen are extolled and acclaimed on the proper occasion in tones of patriotic duty, but in the end, no one remembers them, except (perhaps) their mothers:

> Elegant and bantering, the city clatters and bangs and laughs. The theatres teem with people, the cafés are under storm, the streets glitter with jewels and smiles … It's Christmas, time for frolicking! It's New Year's Eve! Who speaks of death or cares about morality? And why should a soldier back from the muddy enemy-battered trenches go bitterly muttering? Does he want contrite faces, drapes of mourning, simple garb, a dignified mien? … There's money around, with which to pay and have a jolly time. That's the way life is. Life dictates that … a fiancée bereft of her paramour should smile at her renewed hopes of youth; that the young widow resign herself swiftly to the joys of the world. Only the mothers … in bitter solitude stifle an unnamed grief. (Tonelli 1921, p. 63)

On his short leave Mario Quaglia turns in solace from the unbearable hypocrisy of the patriotic bourgeois clubs and the stiff barrack-room manners of his superiors to a brothel he frequented in his student days. There, however, he meets one of those "behind-the-lines cavalry officers," elegant and dandified, who holds forth on the tedium of garrison life and the need to organize a good horse racetrack: "trembling-lipped I yelled—here we are at war and no one appears to know! I've seen more than one such cluttering these halls of prosperous amusement ever since the days of call-up. May I remind you there are people who've shed their blood several times … and without whining gone back up there where men weep and die" (Quaglia 1934, p. 196). But the odd man out is the convalescent on home leave who is forced to flee a town that is no longer his. "Don't talk like that, young master Mario," says one of the prostitutes, "why, you've grown so sharp making war.—I'll say I've grown sharp. What on earth possessed me to come down here?" (Quaglia 1934, p. 196).

In this sense, Great War writers are clearly *disillusioned*. Disillusionment is the gap between the naïve picture of war entertained before seeing action and the experience in the front line, and still more the unbridgeable

gulf between fighting men and the rest of society, military or civilian, who go on denying the reality of warfare and ignoring the sacrifice of the men at the front. This stark truth is usually borne in on the veteran precisely when back home on leave: "I've seen too many young men in mufti or townie-style military uniform pacing the pavements of the Corso or wearing out the café seats; I've seen too many jostling at the theatre or cinema door" (Pizzicaria 1931, p. 57).

There is no disillusionment, on the contrary, when it comes to portraying the band of brothers at the front, a haven of good feeling for the trench veteran who has "lost all memory of that other life" and has no patience with anything except the little family of his unit. The pathos of group feeling rivets the focus on portraying the trenches as a place of triumphant camaraderie, solidarity, honest emotion—a state of contentment that may lapse into rhapsodic moments of narrative hymning military life (Senardi 2008, pp. 7–52; Lafon 2014, pp. 22–58). On the worst European front, and even amidst the shambles of the Caporetto retreat depicted in Ardengo Soffici's sombre epic *La ritirata del Friuli* (1919), the war is still the sublime adventure of a "splendid heroic youth" (Soffici 1919, p. 72) daily facing death in the serene awareness that theirs is an extraordinary time of testing. They will pine for the days spent in the trenches as "something open and pure," never to be repeated, and likewise, when the retreat is over, the beauty of that lost land, "the serene Alps and the Carso crimson … full of blood and glory" will cause the diarist a pang of melancholy: there, he confesses, he spent the best part of his youth (Soffici 1919, p. 258). Such *topoi* are common to Soffici, a national interventionist, to a populist democrat such as Mario Puccini (*Il soldato Cola*), to dégagé novelists and diarists such as Giovanni Comisso (*Giorni di guerra*) and Corrado Alvaro (*Vent'anni*) or disenchanted veterans such as Arturo Stanghellini (*L'introduzione alla vita mediocre*) or Luigi Bartolini (*Il ritorno sul Carso*). Although differing in their background ideology and life patterns, all of them remembered their wartime days as an extraordinary human (male) community experience amidst which, and thanks to which, they shared a season that was tragic, unrepeatable and unforgettable.

In *Giorni di guerra*, one of the most eccentric war memoirs, the ethical code of the little band provides an anchor of moral safety. The soldier-author Comisso is a rare case of egocentrism; the recollection of his time as a combatant is a voyeuristic description of the natural beauty and fascinating bodies of his young comrades. Few pages in the entire corpus of

Italian war literature afford such a bold description of the potentially homoerotic trench community as Comisso gives of his fellow soldiers (Bertacchini 1983, pp. 115–39). But when the rout of Caporetto shatters this idyllic *war game* and the military hierarchy collapses, it is the common destiny of his companions in arms, "my soldiers" tied by bonds of "affectionate obedience," that enables a sense of duty and resolve to survive (Comisso 2002, p. 426). With a handful of companions Comisso embarks on a daring anabasis towards the Italian lines, during which the responsibility of command will steady the carefree hedonism of the foregoing months and change the boy in uniform into a brave and prudent leader (Comisso 2002, pp. 448–49).

The memories of many who returned would revert insistently to that community of young men in their twenties. Civilian life proved a disappointment; they pined for a war now remembered for the mythical courage, loyalty and friendship it afforded. The nostalgia for the front would find its way into the pages of writers for many years to come. That impossible return and trench nostalgia are the guiding theme of Luigi Bartolini's pilgrimage to the places of his war memories, the war zone where he once fought. Bartolini's is the paradigmatic contrast between the heroic glorious myth of wartime experience and the flatness of civilian life. In his *Return to Carso* (1934), Bartolini, a prolific and versatile painter and best-seller writer, conjures up the battles, the months in the trenches, the risks shared with his brothers in arms as "our high-point" and peace as regression to a state of drabness. At every station of his memoir Via *Crucis*, the memory of daring deeds, adventures of love and war, friends lost and found is set against the disenchantment of the following phase of life (Bartolini 1934, pp. 163, 200–9). For Gino Cornali, demobilization would not arrive until autumn 1919 and meant return to a civilian life offering various forms of promise (a fiancée awaiting him, university to finish and the prospect of a good job), but it also presaged the end of a marvellous adventure in which he discovered the only friendship possible, that between men who have looked death in the face together, have protected one another and have together won each battle for survival. Peace is goodbye to all that, to an exceptional situation coinciding with being in one's twenties and discovering a better self:

> Yes, we should meet up dressed in mufti; we should hug one another in emotion and then find some hidden nook to swap memories. But it would be different: each of us would have his own life, family and other friends in

> need, other duties, other responsibilities. The way we were up until that day, with our proud twenty-year-old serenity, would linger as a ghostly past that we would lack the courage to pine for aloud, but leave it shut away in the cupboard with our crumpled uniform. (Cornali 1934, p. 282)

Youth protracted by war with its apparently endless shelving of responsibility (finishing education, a family, a permanent job, the arrival of adult duties), and one's companions in arms: these two linchpins of wartime life proved the hardest to give up. Arturo Stanghellini's successful memoir, *Introduzione alla vita mediocre* (1924), has its fair share of front-line horrors and the victory of the sublime over the mediocrity of peace. He is neither a survivor without roots nor a fanatical nationalist, rather an intellectual and civil servant with a solid career and considerable success as a novelist. Yet, his too is an unachieved return from the front, a *nostos* manqué from a war that included "illustrious, grandiose ideas," while civilian life offers only derision from the old skivers, pettiness and calculating self-interest:

> The inebriation of sacrifice, the purity of every gesture made in the face of death, contemplation of death in the face of fallen friends, the joy brought by news of our distant families, the rapt marvel of a fresh morning birdcall during a lull in the bombardment. That was the war we shall continue to love in the silence of this peace where hatred, egoism and envy seem fiercer than the necessary ferocity of war. (Stanghellini 1924, pp. 242–43)

Notes

1. On the category of "ego-documents" and the historiographical debate about personal writings of the 1914–1918, see Bessel and Wierling (2018).
2. "Maggio Radioso" is the most common expression used to refer to the weeks before 23 May 1915, when several demonstrations in favour of the war erupted into violence. See Vigezzi (1966) and Varsori (2015).

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